

# Behind enemy lines: Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*

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It might be a scene straight from a Hollywood war movie. The enemy lines enclose the brave but embattled camp. Somehow, God only knows how, a message must be smuggled across to the commander so that he can relieve their position. Which brave lad is going to step forward? Who will risk his life to carry that message through the jaws of death and bring salvation to his comrades? Out of the ranks step two young men, best buddies, determined to stick together through thick and thin, prepared to risk all for the common good.

Of course, in Hollywood, the message always gets through. Sure, you may lose one of the brave lads along the way. The violins swell with sentiment as his friend holds up his drooping head, the mortally wounded soldier gasps out between discreetly bloody coughs some final farewell to his pal. Yet no modern producer, no test audience would tolerate a grim finale where the message doesn't reach the general, where both buddies are killed and mutilated by the enemy, but not before they have slaughtered dozens of the defenceless enemy in their drunken sleep. No more would they warm to a later scene where Mom doesn't simply wipe a silent tear from a patriotic eye, but hysterically rails against the very concept of war until she has to be gagged and removed because she is so bad for morale. Yet this is precisely the version which Virgil gives us when Nisus and Euryalus volunteer to carry a message to Aeneas in book nine of the *Aeneid*.

We first meet Nisus and Euryalus at Anchises' funeral games in book five, where Nisus cheats, to ensure victory for his boyfriend Euryalus (see Helen Lovatt's piece in this issue). Moving on a few months – and four books – we find the Trojans in their camp surrounded by hostile Latins. The initially promising exchanges with king Latinus go seriously awry when Juno interferes with her hellish henchperson, Allecto. Fate may want Aeneas to marry Lavinia, but her fiancé, Turnus, and the archetypal mother-in-law, Amata, are having none of it. Mix in the small matter of some illegal deer-hunting and you have a lot of very angry locals taking up arms against the group of refugees from a war-torn country. Aeneas sets off up the river Tiber in search of allies, but in doing so leaves his people leaderless and vulnerable.

On watch-duty, Nisus is seized by the desire to achieve a glorious deed, and Euryalus is determined to accompany him. They approach Ascanius and the Trojan elders who warmly welcome their offer to take a message through the enemy lines to Aeneas. All is going well until they become side-tracked into slaughtering and plundering their Italian enemies as they lie in a drunken stupor. They are disturbed, and in the confusion they become separated. Nisus escapes, but Euryalus, busy stripping a particularly fine piece of armour, is captured. Despite Nisus' attempts to save him, Euryalus is killed, and his friend also dies in the very act of avenging his death.

## Night Vision

In discussing a classical text we must think about its predecessors, the literary models (or 'intertexts') it reworks. There are several of these but with the *Aeneid* we must always look first to Homer. Our episode echoes, alludes to, gets all intertextual with another night episode in the *Iliad*, when Diomedes and

Odysseus set out on a night-time reconnaissance mission to spy on the Trojans, desperate and pinned back as they are owing to Achilles' sulking in his tent. They capture and torture a Trojan spy, Dolon. After getting the information they want, they kill him. They then proceed to the camp of the newly-arrived Trojan ally, the Thracian king Rhesus. After killing Rhesus and many of his soldiers, they steal his beautiful white horses and return to the Greek camp.

You can see the similarities: the nocturnal setting, the enclosure by the enemy, the expedition by two friends, the slaughter of sleeping soldiers. Yet as so often with Virgil and Homer, it is the differences that are most telling. This time it is a Trojan not a Greek camp that is besieged, and throughout the second half of the poem we see characters jostling to play out different roles from the *Iliad* – is it Aeneas or Turnus who will turn out to be the new Achilles and kill the new Hector? Where Odysseus and Diomedes are successful in their mission, Nisus and Euryalus fail like Dolon. One problem is that they are too Homeric in their determination to strip their dead foes of armour. In the world of the *Aeneid*, straddling the space between Homer's Troy and Augustus' Rome, this is not only an undesirable, but also a very dangerous thing to do.

The relationship between the pair is very important in forming our response to the episode. Odysseus and Diomedes were great pals. Virgil, however, subtly alters the relationship so that our pair are lovers. It is interesting to think back to one of the speeches in praise of love in Plato's *Symposium* (see Frisbee Sheffield's piece in this issue). Phaedrus says there how wonderful an army made up of lovers would be, since each would act more bravely in front of his lover and risk more on his behalf. An interesting contrast to the homophobic regulations governing the army in many modern countries.

In the *Aeneid*, Nisus initially escapes from the Italians and could easily have gone on to deliver the crucial message to Aeneas, come back and relieved the siege of the Trojan camp. It is because he realises that Euryalus is not behind him that he turns back, because Euryalus is about to be killed that he announces his presence to the enemy, because Euryalus is killed by the Latin commander Volcens that he suicidally rushes to avenge his boyfriend's death. It is a heroic, movingly described action, but the Platonic figure Phaedrus seems to be proved wrong: Nisus' love for Euryalus, in this 'army of lovers' at any rate, leads to military failure.

## Spoiling for a fight

Another key theme in the episode is that of spoils, weapons stripped from defeated enemies. At the very beginning of the episode, Ascanius promises rewards if the pair succeed, a long list climaxing with Turnus' horse, armour, shield and helmet. This of course never comes to pass, but the theme of taking other people's armour and paying the price for it recurs throughout the *Aeneid*. At the sack of Troy, Aeneas' band of Trojans put on the armour of some Greeks as a disguise and are attacked by their own comrades. The female warrior Camilla dies when she decides to kill Chloereus purely to acquire his flashy armour.

Most importantly of all, Turnus kills Aeneas' companion, Pallas and strips him of his baldrick – a cunning plan. This of course is yet another echo of the *Iliad* where Hector kills

Patroclus, strips Achilles' armour from his body and is killed in turn. Here, Achilles is pretty angry anyway about his best buddy's death, and there is not much on God's good earth that is going to stop him killing Hector. Aeneas however is *pius Aeneas*, respectful of his duty to god, man, country and family. He is a model for the emperor Augustus, a template for what a good Roman is expected to be. When he has the wounded Turnus at his mercy, begging for mercy, we expect him to remember what his father told him in book six, in the underworld: beat down the arrogant but spare the subjected. Turnus is about as subjected as they come, and Aeneas is starting to yield to his better nature when he catches sight of Pallas' sword-belt on Turnus, and all the rage, grief and guilt flood over him. He kills Turnus, inflamed with fury, the quality he has been struggling against throughout the poem, and the last words of the epic describe the young Italian's complaining soul flitting down to the shadows. All, or in large part, because Turnus had made the mistake of stripping and wearing his defeated enemy's armour.

So it is with Euryalus. He not only slaughters the sleeping Italians, he takes spoils including, crucially, the helmet of Messapus. Now, having acted out the role of their Homeric models, Odysseus and Diomedes, Nisus and Euryalus have the misfortune of the Homeric Dolon. When a troop of Latins arrive, Euryalus is spotted, rather betrayed by the very helmet he had stolen, glinting in the shadows of the night. In a literal, prosaic way, it is because they spend so long killing that they are still around when the Latins arrive, and it is because the light reflects off Messapus' helmet that Volcens sees, captures and eventually kills him. Yet you can see the figurative way this works: the excess of the slaughter, going beyond that classical ideal of moderation, the classic mistake of stripping your enemy, all lead to the death of Nisus and Euryalus.

Yet, as with other 'losers' in the *Aeneid*, we may well feel for Nisus and Euryalus. Their love and friendship make them very attractive figures. The utter dismay of Nisus when he realises that Euryalus has been captured, his desperate attempts to save him, his desire to die in his friend's place are all movingly described. Perhaps the most beautiful moment of all is the death of Euryalus. When Volcens kills him, Virgil writes what are, even read in isolation, beautiful and moving lines:

*As when the purple flower, cut down by the plough,  
Languishes in death, or the poppy lowers the head  
On its weary neck whenever rain should oppress it.*

Yet this is one of the places where intertextuality comes into its own. The death of Euryalus echoes that of Gorgythion in Homer's *Iliad*, who died 'as a poppy in a garden casts its head to one side, weighed down with fruit and the spring showers'. So we immediately think of another beautiful young man cut down young, but at least this is an epic and even Homeric simile. The image of the 'plough', however, comes from a heart-wrenching poem of Catullus. In it, he can no longer bring himself even directly to address Lesbia, the woman he loves but who has betrayed him; he does so indirectly by telling his friends Furius and Aurelius to pass on 'a few unkind words'. The poem ends with the touching image of a flower which falls and dies, when it is merely touched by a passing plough.

This is a lyric poem, a personal poem, far removed from the grandiose world of epic. The Romans gave immense importance to genre. Epic was supposed to be about big, heroic themes, treated with pathos, but predominantly impersonal. Lyric, at the other extreme, was very personal, immediate. Virgil is forever confusing the tone of his poem by introducing allusions to other genres, each of which carries its own emotional and thematic resonances and affects the way we read the poem. So it is with this lyric inclusion here. Catullus' poem deals with friendship and love. The death of love and Euryalus' death suggest the needless and tragic destruction of a thing of beauty by a mindless, impersonal force. The image fits into a wider network of anthems for doomed youth within the *Aeneid*. Countless young

people die before their time: Lausus, Pallas, Camilla, Turnus. Often there is flower imagery which suggests deflowering, the loss of virginity. These young people should all have gone on to enjoy a full, productive and reproductive life, but instead of that healthy deflowering in marriage, they are sterilely deflowered by death, their only bridegroom.

Here then we have an extremely complex episode, far removed from the certainties of so many modern war films. We feel sympathy and even admiration for Nisus and Euryalus. Even Virgil himself, in an unparalleled outburst, declares their fame will last forever. Yet we are uneasy about their brutal slaughter of sleeping men, their desire for glory and spoils, their failure – a result of these actions, but also of their mutual devotion and privileging of the personal over the public. As a result, they threaten the mission to found the Roman people, a mission founded upon the self-denial which made Aeneas abandon Dido, not upon the self-destructive love of Nisus or the morale-sapping lamentation of Euryalus' mother. Whether the mission is worth the deaths of Nisus, Euryalus, Dido, Turnus and countless others is one of the questions which Virgil leaves to us, his readers.

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